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ABSTRACT

Study of the history of adult education is worthwhile, despite perceived problems of studying history---ancient, modern, and postmodern. The ancient problems of historiography can best be summed up in the word "antiquarianism." Characteristics of modernity are as follows: the notion that history is progress, metanarratives, nationalist histories, and the study of history for its own sake. In postmodernity, all appears relative and fragmentary. Meaning is constructed within language; therefore, history is conceived as text. There is a very real danger that this postmodernist approach will lead down a blind alley of total relativism where history is merely what the historian makes or just a point of view. Therefore, the historian must always be aware of his or her particular vantage point and of other or different standpoints and must endeavor to engage with them. Because of the large amount of profound wisdom in the past, it would be very arrogant to ignore it. Adult educators can learn from the way many questions dealing with adult education have been tackled in the past. Two themes of special interest are the relationship of adult education to democratic participation and the effect of state funding on adult education. History suggests that a new approach to adult education should involve the less formal voluntary sector of adult education and the new social movements. (Contains 39 references.) (YLB)

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Adult Education History: Why rake up the past?

SIXTEENTH ALBERT MANSBRIDGE MEMORIAL LECTURE

BY

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Leeds, 13 June 1996

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Adult education history: why rake up the past?

I should first like to express my thanks to the Nationwide Building Society, who endow this series of lectures, and the University of Leeds, for inviting me to give this sixteenth Albert Mansbridge Memorial Lecture this afternoon. It was both an honour to be invited and a pleasure to accept.

I feel especially pleased to be giving a lecture in memory of Albert Mansbridge for a number of reasons. First, I am indebted to him as co-founder (together with his frequently overlooked wife) of the WEA in 1903. Sixty-one years later the WEA rescued me from the prospect of a lifetime of schoolteaching by employing me as an organising tutor in the Yorkshire North District, and thereby enabling me to spend the next 32 years working in adult education. As I have said elsewhere, what followed was not always as perfect as those first years in the Yorkshire Dales, but I shall always be grateful to the WEA (and therefore, indirectly, to the founder of the WEA) for my initiation into adult education. (Fieldhouse, 1993, vi.)

Secondly, I should like to take this opportunity to acknowledge our collective debt to Mansbridge for his numerous contributions to adult education, not only as co-founder of the WEA but as inspirer and promoter of many other strands of adult education during the first quarter of the twentieth century including, of course, the grandly named 'World Association of Adult Education' in 1918 and the British Institute of Adult Education in 1921. Probably his greatest achievement was securing direct grant aid from the Board of Education in 1908, closely followed by his hijacking of the more viable remnants of the old Extension Movement. Without these achievements the history not only of the WEA but of university adult education would have been very different, and probably quite short-lived.

Thirdly, I think I can claim to know Mansbridge quite well historically. Those of you who have read some of my work on the history of the WEA will know that I have not always awarded Mansbridge an 'A' grade for his motives and intentions. I regard his advocacy of 'study for its own sake' and a spiritual knowledge uncontaminated by the pursuit of material goals, which would 'divert the strong movements of the people from the narrow paths of immediate interest' and encourage 'responsible thinking' and social harmony, as a part of the early twentieth-century Liberal strategy to

divert the British working class and Labour Movement from the allures of socialist thinking. (Mansbridge, 1944, 6; Fieldhouse, 1996a, 168-9.) As such it was a far cry from Mansbridge's supposedly apolitical stance. But despite my critical assessment of his intentions and motives, I have always given full recognition to the significance of his very considerable achievements.

In the very first Mansbridge Memorial Lecture in 1963, Charles Morris, then Vice-Chancellor of this University, regretted that the sense of adult education's social purpose, which had been espoused by Mansbridge and the early WEA, had very largely disappeared from university adult education by the fifties and sixties. (Morris, 1963, 5-6; Fieldhouse, 1996a, 218.) Most of us would probably say amen to that and could add our commentaries on the developments that have taken place in the three decades since Morris was standing here. But that is not the topic of this lecture.

What I do want to do is examine the nature and purpose of adult education history and ask the question 'why rake up the past?' about adult education. As someone who has just completed *A History of Modern British Adult Education* you might think I am not the best person to ask this question because I will not be tackling it objectively. And you would be partly right: I start from the premise that there is a value in studying history. But whether this inevitable subjectivity disqualifies me from asking the question is part of what I shall be examining this afternoon. What I want to do is explore the reasons why I think the study of history, including the history of adult education, is worthwhile. First, I intend to examine some of the perceived problems, or problematics, of studying history – ancient, modern and post-modern. Then I should like to suggest that, despite the acknowledged difficulties, there are good reasons for studying history. Finally, I will attempt to illustrate and substantiate my contention with some insights from the history of adult education.

We do not need to spend much time on the ancient problems of historiography which can best be summed up in the one word 'antiquarianism'. For the nineteenth-century antiquarians, history was not so much a matter of answering questions as of collecting facts, just as their natural history counterparts collected fossils or butterflies. But as E. H. Carr reminded us in his little classic, *What Is History?*, more than thirty years ago: 'It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls

on them: it is he [*sic*] who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context'. (Carr, 1961, 1964 edn., 11.) Or, as J. A. Hobson remarked even longer ago: 'The desire to discover some hidden truth and to present it in an interesting and elaborate design drives the scholar and the scientist to the most intricate modes of self-deceit in the selection, rejection and appraisal of evidence and the processes of reasoning they employ . . .'. (Hobson, 1926, 14.) Carr is somewhat out of favour these days, but I shall be returning later to his assessment of what history is. In the meantime, his and Hobson's comments provide us with a fair warning of the problems associated with the antiquarians' fact-collecting approach to history.

More modern in approach is the notion that 'history is progress' or, at the very least, it is the record of inevitable human progress. As an example of this, Carr quotes Lord Acton's vision of the march of history as an unending progress towards liberty:

> It is by the combined efforts of the weak . . . to resist the reign of force and constant wrong, that, in the rapid change but slow progress of four hundred years, liberty has been preserved, and secured, and extended, and finally understood. (Acton, 1906, 51.)

Carr qualifies this whig view by suggesting that there were 'periods of regression as well as periods of progress' and that 'if we are to retain the hypothesis of progress, we must . . . accept the condition of the broken line'. (Carr, 1964, 114-7) But broken line or not, there was a sense of inevitable progress in this whig interpretation of history, just as there was in the Marxist notion of humanity advancing inexorably towards the classless society and the end of history. As Keith Jenkins has recently pointed out, both these 'bourgeois and proletarian versions of modernity . . . articulated as key elements in their respective ideologies a shared view of history as a movement with a direction immanent within it – a history which was purposefully going somewhere – differing only in the selection of "its" ultimate destination and the "essentialist" dynamics . . . which would get "it" there.' They constitute 'a general schema of historical development usually construed as appropriately "progressive".' (Jenkins, 1995, 8.)

Also characteristic of modernity, and exhibiting similar tendencies towards the meta-narrative, are nationalist histories: a form of history which has, of course, become popular in recent years with the New Right, and which has influenced the national curriculum for schools.

In 1987 William Rees Mogg advocated that national history 'should be the very core of the core, the central understanding of his [*sic*] world that every British child should be given. It alone shows how our nation has grown, the principles that have inspired us, the perils we have survived, the glories we have known ... It would be a shame if so remarkable a national story, with so much honour in it, ever ceased to be told'. (*The Independent*, 21 July, 1987.) Half a century earlier, looking back on the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell had warned how frighteningly close such history was to propaganda, based not even on selected facts, but frequently upon official lies which, 'after those who actually remember the war are dead ... will be universally accepted. So for all practical purposes the lie will have become truth ... The implied objective of this line of thought is a nightmare world in which the Leader, or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but the past'. (Orwell, 1970, 235-6.) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was not a bad guess for anticipating this nightmare becoming something of a reality in Britain!

Raymond Williams, possibly with the adult education 'Great Tradition' debates of the 1950s in mind, argued that within any cultural practice there is a strong tendency for a 'selective tradition' to emerge, which shapes the past and present and 'which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification'. (Williams, 1977, 115.) This 'selective tradition seeks to perpetuate the myths of the past. It seeks to read the past as history and tradition in such a way that the past/history is used to justify the present.' Feminist and other 'different' approaches have shown how much history has been constructed 'to serve specific interests hegemonically by excluding the awareness of the existence and impact of other interests'. Similarly, it has been justifiably argued that many narrative histories of adult education have uncritically constructed both a past and a present mythology. (Wilson and Melichar, 1995, 425-7; Chase, 1995, 56-7.)

Keith Jenkins, in his recent book *On 'What Is History?'*, notes how many historians have abandoned the meta-narrative approach for what he calls 'history in the lower case ... plain, common sense, humble "history": ... the study of the past "for its own sake" as distinct from the study of the past explicitly for the sake of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat'. (Jenkins, 1995, 8-9.) This is a deceptively conservative, backward-looking, anti-progressive approach to history. The 'eminent former departmental local historian' who stated that 'reflection on

history was the sort of thing best left to broken-down historians no longer capable of working in the field' (Donajgrodzki 1996, 212-3), clearly belongs to this 'common sense', 'history-for-its-own-sake' school; as does, unfortunately, a great deal of local history. Such historians seem to think that provided you eschew any mega-visions, historical truth will just emerge from the facts. It is dangerously close to a regression into antiquarianism, made respectable by immaculate referencing.

A rather more virulent form of this 'lower case' history currently stems from the heritage industry. It creates a nostalgic and picturesque mythology of the past which attempts to justify an essentially conservative present and future. 'Increasingly, real experiences are overtaken by pseudo events ... we have no understanding of history in depth, but instead are offered a contemporary creation, more costume drama and re-enactment than critical discourse'. (Hewison, 1987.) Its intention, or effect, is to make a mythical past look more attractive than a reformed future.

Not surprisingly, therefore, despite the rather derogatory remark about historiographical practice emanating from the Department's 'eminent former ... local historian', more reflective historians have come to question the old certainties of modernity and the confidence expressed by Carr in the 1960s that the self-awareness of historians was an adequate safeguard against any historiographical difficulties. In the words of Juliet Gardiner, there has been a 'stretching of the historical canvas': a remapping, a reinterrogation, and a reformulation of the questions that have led to a 'retreat from faith in impartial "truth" (and) the loss of the belief in the past as a jigsaw which will one day be complete.' The 'spurious hope of "coherence"' has been replaced by a diversity of approaches, a fragmentation and a new pluralism which 'atomises the past so that we are left with nothing but the loose change of history. It ... renders any expectation of a synthesis hopeless: the chances of a coherent narrative history, the possibility of putting the story of the past back together again, are lost forever'. (Gardiner, 1988, 1-2.)

'Modernist' History, then, has been widely criticised as 'a self-referential, problematic expression of "interests", an ideological-interpretive discourse without any "real" access to the past as such; unable to engage in any dialogue with "reality" ... "history" now appears to be just one more "expression" in a world of postmodern expressions'. (Jenkins, 1995, 9.)

And so we come to post-modernity where there are no meta-narratives, no certainties: where all appears relative and fragmentary. But before we examine the post-modernist approach, or approaches, to history I should like to say in parentheses that I do not believe it is necessary to discard all the value systems along with the rather naive, progressive schema and certainties of modernity. I do not think I was ever a good enough Marxist to believe in the end of history, beyond either bourgeois or proletarian dominance: certainly not in the foreseeable future! But one does not have to believe in the inevitability of history to find many of the moral values of Marxism or socialism persuasive. Neither does one have to be a nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* fanatic or a Thatcherite to value many of the tenets of liberalism. Nor does one have to believe in God to recognise the validity of many Christian values.

As an illustration of this I should like to quote briefly from an essay written by my great friend and mentor, Fred Sedgwick, who was, of course, District Secretary of the Yorkshire North WEA District for nearly thirty years and was my boss when I worked for the WEA in the 1960s.

In June 1949, in the midst of a very hectic work schedule, he completed a twenty-seven page essay for his philosophy tutorial class on 'A comparison of the teachings of Richard Hooker and Thomas Aquinas upon law'. It is typical (of the man) that after a careful analysis of the two philosophers' views about the natural law, (he) asked 'what does this matter to us?' and concluded that from them 'we may take courage if we are oppressed by our times that a Christian view of the Universe, a Christian conception of Man, a Christian belief in the possibility of an ordered yet free society, a Christian faith in the essential goodness of human nature are capable of meeting the challenge of rationalistic enquiry and utilitarianism on their own grounds and in the end providing us with a sense of values we so much need'. (Fieldhouse, 1996b, 5-6.)

Fred, who was a lifelong socialist as well as a devout Methodist, would have been the first to agree that you do not need to be a Christian believer to accept that this sense of values does matter to us.

But let us now consider for a few minutes the post-modernist approach to history. One of the main exponents is the American historian Hayden White. His theories have been lovingly summarised

by Keith Jenkins in his book *On 'What Is History?'* in which he paraphrases White as follows:

> ... it has recently been realised that people in the past *did not actually live stories* either individually (at the level of 'real-life' stories) or collectively (at the level of, say, metanarratives which give purpose and meaning to the past as, for example, in Marxist or Whig theories of history) so that to see people in the past or the past 'as such' in story form, is to give to it an imaginary series of narrative structures and coherences it actually never had. To see the *content* of the past (i.e. what actually occurred) as if it were a series of stories (of great men, of wars and treaties, of the rise of labour, the emancipation of women, of 'Our Island Story', of the ultimate victory of the proletariat and so forth) is therefore a piece of 'fiction'. (Jenkins, 1995, 20.)

It is necessary to recognise that 'the only stories the past has are those conferred on it by historians' interpretive emplotment ... getting the picture straight ... is not only another story but an impossible one: you can always get another picture, you can always get another context.' In other words, 'all history is interpretive and never literally true'. (Ibid, 20–3.) Another post-modernist concept, denial theory, which suggests that we repress or fail to remember what we most want to deny (Orbach, 1996), reinforces this view of history which was recently summed up by Raphael Samuel:

> By placing inverted commas, metaphorically speaking, around the notion of the real, it invites us to see history not as a record of the past, more or less faithful to the facts, not yet as an interpretation answerable to the evidence even if it does not start from it, but as an invention, or fiction, of historians themselves, an inscription on the past rather than a reflection of it, an act of designation masquerading as a true-life story. (Samuel, 1992, 220.)

This brings us to the post-structuralist notion that meaning is constructed within language, and to the concept of history as text. This was explained by Hayden White in a comment on 'New Historicism' in 1989:

> ... historical accounts of the past are themselves based upon the presumed adequacy of a written representation or textualisation of the events of the past to the reality of those events themselves. Historical events, whatever else they may be, are events which really happened or are believed really to have happened, but which are no longer directly accessible to perception. As such, in order to be constituted as objects of reflection, they must be described ... in some kind of natural or technical language. The analysis or explanation ... that is subsequently provided ... is [therefore] always

an analysis or explanation of the events as previously *described*. The description is a product of processes of linguistic condensation, displacement, symbolization, and secondary revision of the kind that inform the production of texts. (Quoted in Jenkins, 1995, 32.)

This is the 'linguistic turn' – one of the whole series of 'turns' which Stanley Fish has argued in *Doing What Comes Naturally* have replaced literalism and problematicised the foundational attitudes and modernist manifestations of the 'Western Tradition'. (Fish, 1989.)

Jenkins sums up this post-modernist historiography as 'an understanding of the past ... which asserts that such an understanding is always positioned, is always fabricated, is always ultimately self-referencing and is never true beyond peradventure; that history has no intrinsic meaning'. (Jenkins, 1995, 37.) 'Historiography ultimately becomes a series of ideas (theories) that historians have about making the past into "history", all of which are problematic.' (Ibid, 21.)

White reiterated this post-modernist position in a debate with Arthur Marwick in 1994, when he argued

> If history is ... a construction by historians, composed out of the data or evidence contained in the primary sources, it is important to be able to identify the ways in which the historian's language transforms her (sic) 'object' of study into a 'subject' of specifically historical discourse ... Any historian's account of her subject is constrained by conventions of language, genre, mode (for example narrative), argument, and a host of other, cultural and social contextual considerations ... (*THES*, 25 November 1994, 17–18.)

Relating all this to adult education, Michael Stephens rather more succinctly commented that

> We are all imprisoned by the historical experiences of the country in which we live. What we may or may not do is determined by the attitudes and institutions which developed over the centuries. Adult education provision in England is no exception. (Stephens, 1990.)

There is a very real danger that this post-modernist approach will lead us down a blind alley of total relativism where history is merely what the historian makes, or just a point of view. Such notions are not new: they were debated in the fifties and sixties (Clark, 1957, xxiv–xxv; Carr, 1964, 26); and, even earlier, it was this prospect of 'the very concept of objective truth ... fading from the world', to be displaced by

an amalgam of lies, that haunted George Orwell after his experience in the Spanish Civil War (Orwell, 1970, 236), and which of course later became a central theme of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. He was warning against what would now be regarded as post-modernist relativism.

In a recent perceptive article which applies the works of Foucault, Habermas and Bernstein to adult education history, and to which I want to return later, two other American historians, Arthur L Wilson and Kenneth E Melichar, also suggest that a post-modernist critique raises the spectre of relativism. 'By eschewing an appeal to any standards, we are left with the profound nihilism of no standards.' (Wilson and Melichar, 426.) Jenkins is also aware of the possibilities of 'a dangerous "relativism" or even some sort of anarchic nihilism', while White seems to argue on occasion that we are free to conceive of history as we please. (Jenkins, 1995, 25, 42.) However, in his debate with Arthur Marwick in 1994, White was careful to qualify this position. He was not saying

> that there is no such thing as an historical 'event', that there is no possibility of distinguishing between 'fact' and 'fiction', or that everything is 'relative', and nothing is 'objective'. What it (i.e. postmodernism) does mean is that what counts as an event, as a fact and as an adequate representation or explanation of a historical phenomenon must be adjudged to be relative to the time, place and cultural conditions of its formulation. (*THES*, 25 November 1994, 17.)

This brings post-modernism back from the brink of absolute relativism to the more rational notion that the historian must always be aware of his or her particular vantage point and of other or different standpoints and must endeavour to engage with them. Standpoint theorists argue that by attempting to view history from a number of vantage points, the historian can to some extent guard against history being interpreted from a single or purely personal point of view, although of course there is always the danger – indeed the likelihood – that some standpoints will be more predominant than others. (Farish *et al*, 1995, 97-8.)

At this point I should like to pay tribute to the work of Malcolm Chase of this Department, and particularly his article in *Studies* a year ago which pinpointed many of British adult education history's modernist weaknesses. (Chase, 1995.) Although I have previously criticised aspects of this article (Fieldhouse, 1996c), it is nevertheless a valuable critique which suggests that a pluralist approach to the history

of adult education along the lines of standpoint theory might rescue it from its modernist tendencies. Chase suggests that adult education historians should in future pay less attention to the old meta-narratives and make more room for other perspectives such as gender, ethnicity and race, linguistic turn, literacy, autobiography and life histories. Although I find his agenda a rather strange mixture of topics, approaches and methods, nevertheless I believe the thrust of his argument, that we must engage more with the 'other' and the 'different', is correct.

Wilson and Melichar in their article concur with Bernstein's proposition 'that the purpose of history is to analyze the traditions in which cultural practices are acted out in order to expose prejudgments, prejudices and illusions.' They suggest this is done by testing and risking one's convictions and prejudices through encounter in a 'critically engaged dialogue' with the 'other' *à la* Habermas. Part of this critique 'has to be an examination of the selective traditions and the values and standards that emanate as well as support the traditions that have produced the present ... We have to identify the hegemonic structures of thought, standards, and practice and then through discourse analysis we can reveal the 'other' to challenge the selective traditions of our current practice'. (Wilson and Melichar, 423, 429–30.)

Wilson and Melichar go on to quote Hooper's argument that 'What is called for is the disordering of the periphery and the core ... In this way, by exploring this "rich complexity of differences", we will uncover clues to the errors of the dominant tradition ...' But they argue that we can only create the necessary critical encounters with the 'other' through a conscious reclaiming of the neglected or deliberately ignored strands of history. (Ibid, 424–5, 430.) This is, I believe, what Malcolm Chase was advocating in his article. It is also, I think, what H P Smith, who was one time Secretary of the Oxford Tutorial Classes Committee, meant when he wrote in a little booklet entitled *What is the History of Adult Education?*

> No one can object to professionals selecting from the material what suits their purpose, but when they deny the validity of the history they leave out, the mystique comes into its own. (Smith, 1965, 28.)

That was written over thirty years ago, and this brings me to the contention that many of the supposedly new insights and approaches of

post-modernism are not so new to historiography. It is not their intrinsic worth (which, like many theories, I find I accept in part) but their claims to uniqueness which I find alienating. Way back in the 1940s, in the shadow of the Nazi perversions of truth that were so exercising Orwell, the philosopher Harold Hodges (who much later taught me ethics as part of my undergraduate degree at Reading) wrote a very perceptive pamphlet on *Objectivity and Impartiality* which foreshadowed many of the post-modernist concerns about historiography. Hodges suggested four factors of subjectivity which impose logical limitations to objective thinking. The first consists of the presuppositions and methodological assumptions that determine 'what kind of relations we look for in our data, what kinds of questions we ask, and so what kind of answers we get'. Hodges argued that these presuppositions inevitably influence one's interpretation of the data. (Hodges, 1946, 12.)

Secondly, the selection, from the raw material of innumerable facts, of those facts which seem of some significance, reveals our preferences and is 'determined by our pre-existing idea of what is worthwhile in human life'. The selection is a value judgement. (Ibid, 13.) This, of course, corresponds exactly with what Carr later said about historical facts.

Hodges's third subjective factor is the scholar's inevitable specialisation in one section of the field of knowledge. The methods and principles of that specialisation shape his or her outlook even on things outside the specialism. Fourthly, we are all necessarily limited by the intellectual horizons of the society and historical epoch in which we live. Although such 'blindness' is obvious to later generations, it is by the nature of things undetectable at the time. (Ibid, 14-15.)

In addition to these subjective factors, Hodges argued that the thinking of both individuals and social classes is partly determined by their psychological bias, and by a whole host of deep-seated hopes and fears, dreams and imaginings which are altogether alien to 'factual truth', but which come to be confused with it. As Hodges said, 'all of us can detect the mythologies of other people. Our own appear to us as well grounded convictions, and we are zealous in their defence. To unravel the confusion would require a clarity and persistence in self-examination such as is beyond most of us.' (Ibid, 15-17.)

This last point was almost exactly echoed by Stanley Fish a few years ago when he commented 'one can always lodge objection to the

histories offered by one's opponents, one cannot (at least legitimately) label them as non-historical'. (Quoted in Jenkins, 1995, 34.)

Indeed, I would suggest that Hodges's four factors of subjectivity, articulated exactly fifty years ago, went a long way towards covering many of the relativist concerns of post-modernism. I would also suggest that if one compares much of post-modern historiography with the now unpopular writings of E H Carr, one finds many uncanny echoes and similarities. For example, take the following statements by Jenkins, leaning heavily on Hayden White

> ... whilst the historian can certainly 'find' the traces of past events in the historicised records/archive and thus (selectively) establish (some of) 'the facts' about them in, say, a chronicle-type form, no historian can ever find the context or the totality or the background or 'the past as such' against which the facts can become truly significant and meaningful. (Jenkins, 1995, 19.)

> ... since 'history' comprises everything that ever happened in 'the past', it requires some *tertium comparationis* by which to distinguish between what is 'historical' and what is not and, beyond that, between what is 'significant' and what is relatively insignificant, within 'this past'. (Ibid, 33.)

> ... histories (are) located at the centre, or on the margins, not necessarily by virtue of their historiographical rigour and/or sophistication ... but by their relationship to those that have the power to put them there. (Ibid, 37-8.)

And take the statement of White that

> every mimetic text can be shown to have left something out of the description of its object or to have put something into it that is inessential to what some reader, with more or less authority, will regard as an adequate description. (White, 1978, 3.)

These statements are all very comparable with Hodges's pamphlet or Carr's rejection in *What Is History?* of the empiricist notion of a totally objective historical conclusion drawn from the ascertained facts, which presupposes a complete separation between subject and object. He argued that no such complete separation is possible, and that historians must learn to recognise the extent of their involvement in their own situations in society and in history: 'to recognise, that is to say, the impossibility of total objectivity'. He rejected the concept of absolute truth as inappropriate to the discipline of history. (Carr, 1964, 7-9, 120-3.) It is true that Carr also rejected 'the relativist view that one interpretation is as good as another, or that every interpretation is true

in its own time and place' (Ibid, 121.) but, as I showed earlier, Hayden White has also rejected or abandoned this position.

Carr did claim that there was a 'standard of objectivity' which 'provided the touchstone by which our interpretation of the past will ultimately be judged', and that this is achieved partly by the historian's capacity to rise above his or her inevitable involvement in the social and historical situation. (Ibid, 120–3.) In this he showed more faith in the historian's powers than Hodges who, as I explained earlier, believed that such powers of clarity and self-examination are beyond most of us. But it is precisely this 'issue of critical self-awareness or the lack of it' which Hayden White, in his debate with Arthur Marwick, suggested legitimised the historian. (*THES*, 25 November 1994.)

In a reappraisal of the liberal tradition in university adult education which Dick Taylor, Kathy Rockhill and I wrote some ten years ago, I argued that objective truth was a shibboleth but that it is nevertheless (like the value systems of modernity I referred to earlier) an ideal for which we can strive. In pedagogic terms this means

> giving people access to the arguments and helping them to make up their own minds; it is a tentative, provisional and undogmatic approach; it is an openness of mind and readiness to listen attentively to what other people are saying; it is the avoidance of preaching any specific attitudes or beliefs; it is a desire to develop students' powers of independent judgement ... (Taylor *et al*, 1985, 39.)

Or, as Thomas Hodgkin said in his debate with Raybould about objectivity in the early 1950s, 'the process of teaching (should not be) confused with the process of winning souls for God, liberalism or the revolution'. (Hodgkin, 1950/51, 80.)

This approach is as applicable to historiography as it is to adult education as R H Tawney, who was a master of both, indicated when he said that the best way to achieve impartiality

> is not to attempt to chase all the partialities out; for, being human, we can none of us be other than partial. It is to draw as many as possible of the partialities in, on two conditions. The first is that, if the spirit moves their votaries to propagate a creed, they should do so by the frank exchange of open argument, not by subterranean intrigue. The second is that they shall accord to the opinions of their neighbours, however nauseating or absurd, the same respectful hearing which they claim for their own. (Tawney, 1964, 90.)

Tawney's first condition corresponds with the view recently expressed by Dean MacCannell that 'the one path that still leads in the

direction of scholarly objectivity, detachment and neutrality is ... an openly autobiographical style in which the subjective position of the author . . . is presented in a clear and straightforward fashion'. (MacCannell, 1992, 9-10.)

Tawney's second condition brings us back to standpoint theory and the need to explore the 'rich complexity of differences' and deliberately seek to understand and include viewpoints other than our own: to speak with as many voices as possible. This is the first of three safeguards which David Parker has suggested

> prevent the teaching and study of history from becoming a vehicle of the uncritical presentation of particular ideological assumptions. Most obvious is the existence of a plurality of competing views. The second lies in the capacity of individual historians to recognize their own prejudices and in their willingness to constantly test and revise them against the available evidence. Respect for evidence and the ability to construct coherent interpretations from it is what makes history a discipline as well as a subject ... The third safeguard ... (is the need to ensure) the freedom for teachers to follow the dictates of their own professional judgements rather than those of the state. (*THES*, 1 June 1990.)

David Parker emphasises the centrality of the historian's craft and professional judgement to the discipline of history. These I believe to be the same as E H Carr's 'standard of objectivity' and Hayden White's 'critical self-awareness'. They should emerge from what that very different historian, Geoffrey Elton, advocated as 'a professional training in the treatment of the historical evidence'. (Elton, 1991, 54.) Of course, this training will not eliminate the historiographical problematics I have outlined this afternoon, but if I can bring four such diverse theorists together, I think it at least restores history to the realms of the possible.

History will never be an exact science or a perfect critique or reflection of the past: it will always be limited by the frailties of the historian. We can improve the critique by endeavouring to overcome our subjectivity through critical self-awareness and by engaging with the 'other', seeking out differences and giving voice to as many perspectives as possible. But it will always be only a partial contribution to a better historical understanding of the world we inhabit because of the historian's inevitable limitations and because there will always be new insights, new reflections, new visions. Thus history never comes to the end, nor to a definitive conclusion. It is a constant dialogue; a permanent dialectic. That is why I have said in the

preface to my *History of Modern British Adult Education* that the book does not

> claim to be in any way the final word. As Arthur Marwick recently pointed out (in his debate with Hayden White, *THES*, 25 Nov. 1994), 'All each individual historian produces is *contributions* to knowledge, tentative and fallible, which will be attacked, debated, qualified and amplified ...' (My) book will do no more than that. Its purpose is to contribute to a debate about the nature and significance of adult education in Britain ... (Fieldhouse, 1996a, v.)

I agree therefore with Wilson and Melichar (1995, 432–2) that we should

> ... seek to reach beyond critical notions of depicting history to a critical sense of historically-informed reflection on current practice, a perspective and attitude historically-critical, yet future-orientated ... Instead of forgetting the past, as selective traditions force us to do, we seek to remember the past in order to critique the present so that we can attain the not yet in the future.

Thus 'by looking "backward" we actually are thrust "forward" in our understanding of what we do ... and why we do it'. (Ibid, 432.) Or, as the political scientist James Q Wilson once put it, effective policy analysis 'involves statements about what happened in the past, not speculations about what may happen in the future'. (Tyack, 1983.) Or, as the historian, Ewen Green, more recently said in a debate about the relative importance of different academic disciplines:

> Every individual, every family, every society and every nation is in vital ways dependent on its past. Whether this past is an objective 'reality' or a subjective 'construct' our history informs us of what we do and what we think we could do. (Green, 1996.)

It has always seemed gross arrogance to me that any one generation might think it has all the best answers to all the problems facing humanity without ever looking back into history to learn from the experience and intellectual endeavours of previous generations. I am not talking about details – of course history does not crudely repeat itself in cycles. But in infinite ways, both large and small, the activities and ideas of our ancestors can help us to understand the present and plan for a better future.

In a film about Anne Frank which was shown on television recently, one of the survivors of that human tragedy remarked that the letters she

received from German children frequently stated that their parents and grandparents told them nothing about the war. 'That is the past: there is nothing to gain from raking it all up now'. But watching that film and reliving some of the horror and sadness of that little microcosm of the holocaust vividly demonstrated why we should know about and try to understand our past errors, even the worst of them (or perhaps especially the worst of them). It is the only way that humanity may eventually become a little better.

Equally, I would argue that the more evil aspects of unrestrained capitalism which give rise to unacceptable levels of greed, selfishness, inequality and oppression should have been learnt from the collective experiences of nineteenth-century British history. I do not refer to the myriad of details which do not repeat; nor, certainly, to the imperial glories which William Rees Mogg and the New Right would have us learn; but to the message of John Stuart Mill and others that it is essential that the State creates an environment in which everyone is able to realise his or her own potential, and is not driven into crime either by destitution or, perhaps worse, by copying the hypocritical dishonesty of extortionate capitalists.

I do not have the time in this lecture to develop this theme further, but I should just like to mention two grand histories, both probably deserving to be condemned as meta-narratives; both certainly containing many errors in detail; but both of which I believe made powerful contributions to the understanding of British society at the time they were written and for many years afterwards. I have to say that they are the two historical works which, more than any others, re-directed my life. They are also, interestingly, both written by people who played an important role in British adult education.

The first is Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, first delivered as a series of lectures in 1922 and published in 1926. I believe this book provided a real intellectual base for the critique of capitalism in the 1930s and beyond, even for many people who never actually read it but were nevertheless influenced by it. It was, I believe, the single most potent influence that converted me to socialism in the 1960s. (Tawney, 1938.)

The other history is E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* which was written while Edward was at Leeds, and which was very largely based on his tutorial class teaching. Its contribution not only to the development of what became known as

'history from below', but also to the establishment of a more confident, less deferential working-class culture in the 1960s was very important. (Thompson, 1963; Taylor, 1996, 133-56.)

Turning, finally, more specifically, to the history of adult education, my experience of some twenty years of research in this field, and more recently writing *A History of Modern British Adult Education* over the past four years, convinces me that there is a lot of profound wisdom in the past and it would be very arrogant of us to ignore this. Over and over again I have been impressed by how the adult educationists of the past tackled many of the same problems that face us today: not so much the small, technical problems, which change with changing contexts, but the big questions. What is adult education for? How does it contribute to democratic participation? What is, or should be, the balance between satisfying individuals' needs and society's needs? How does adult education best respond to society's needs? What are the constraints of being publicly funded? What are the constraints of accreditation? These and many more are not new questions, and we can learn from the way they have been tackled in the past.

Two themes that have particularly interested me and influenced the nature of my own research have been the relationship of adult education to democratic participation and the effect on adult education of its being state-funded. I believe that an historical perspective on these sometimes contentious issues gives us a better understanding of the potential and limitations of adult education in British society today and for the future. You do not have to agree with all my interpretations regarding these issues to agree with this hypothesis, bearing in mind what I said earlier about history being a constant dialogue, a permanent dialectic.

Perhaps I should briefly give some more specific examples of history's contribution to our understanding of adult education today. In this respect I would instance the very pertinent comments of Albert Mansbridge and the experiences of the early WEA relating to self-directed learning. (Fieldhouse, 1996a, 168, 197.) Some knowledge and understanding of how this founding principle of the WEA was implemented in practice, could help the present-day advocates of student-centred learning to identify good practice and avoid some of the pitfalls.

On a more personal note, one of my more memorable research moments was the discovery in the Treasury files in the Public Record Office of a letter from Lord Eustace Percy, President of the Board of Education, in 1925, stating that he thought £100,000 spent annually

on subsidising the WEA and university adult education was, if 'properly controlled . . . about the best police expenditure we could indulge in' as a protection against the socialist ideas permeating the working class and Labour Movement at that time. (Ibid, 176.) That discovery did not change my concept of the effect of public funding on adult education, but it certainly crystallised it.

I should like to mention two other historical insights which I owe to contributors to my *History of Modern British Adult Education*, both of which I believe illustrate how an historical perspective improves our understanding of the current situation. Mary Hamilton's account of the history of literacy and adult basic education (Ibid, 142-65.) shows how the establishment of universal compulsory schooling transferred the 'blame' for illiteracy from a lack of education (which was the assumed cause in the nineteenth century) to a presumed lack of innate ability. This in turn led to an over-emphasis on remedial education which still influences modern adult basic education practice.

My other example comes from Naomi Sargant's survey of the history of the Open University in which she demonstrates more clearly than I have seen before how the funding of the infant Open University in the early 1970s was at the expense of the implementation of the Russell Report because the Treasury resisted any claims for increased expenditure on adult education 'on the grounds that such Adult Education is already receiving substantial and increasing sums through the Open University'. This not only helps us to understand why the Open University and the rest of the adult education sector failed to work closely together, but also why the Russell Report ran into the sand, with consequences which we are still living with. (Ibid, 294-5.)

I should like to conclude by summarising the final couple of pages of my *History of Modern British Adult Education* (400-1), as an illustration of how its historical perspectives have led me to view the present and the future. I suggest that

> . . . in the fragmented, post-modernist 'New Times', adult education should be tackling its old preoccupations about equality, democracy, participation and social justice in new ways, engaging with 'the "new social movements" for peace, women's liberation, racial justice, gay liberation and green issues' (Westwood, 1991, 49-51.) And that it should address the crucial concept of citizenship in a less restricted way which gives proper recognition to different identities, and which confronts the 'New Right' re-definition of 'citizenship' with its greater emphasis on social duties rather than rights.

History suggests that this new approach is more likely to emerge from an alliance between the less formal voluntary sector of adult education and the new social movements. Institutionalised adult education has, in the past, been more of a barrier than a facilitator to the involvement of social movements, with the partial exception of the trade union movement. This institutionalised adult education, closely related to the institutionalised structures of the modern industrialised state, would seem to have as doubtful a future as modernity itself. But history also suggests that voluntary effort unsupported by public funding and professional expertise experiences great difficulties in sustaining itself or preventing its standards of learning opportunities from declining to a low level ...

In the British adult education context, the WEA is the organisation which has had most experience in attempting to combine voluntaryism with professionalism and public funding ... This has caused major tensions and conflicts in the past and more recently given rise to a crisis of identity for the Association. Nevertheless, a reformed model of the WEA, attuned to the fragmentary post-modernist culture of the 21st century, is perhaps what is required, not just for the WEA but as a general model for adult education organisations for the future. They will need to be popular and informal but also professionally knowledgeable and supported by access to public funding which is not too closely tied to immediate political whims and fancies. They should 'build ... on adult education's tradition of people's knowledge as opposed to expert knowledge, of participation as opposed to instruction, and of collective and collaborative learning as opposed to individual education and training'. (Finger, Asun and Volpe, 1995.) And they must engage with a wide variety of social movements and ultimately be committed to a democratic social purpose embracing equality and social justice.

I hope this illustrates how history, however provisional its findings are, can help us, in the words of Wilson and Melichar (1995, 432), 'critique the present so that we can attain the not yet in the future'. I should like to finish with a quotation from H P Smith's 1960s pamphlet:

> We have nothing to gain by living in the past but the men and women whom adult education exists to serve are entitled to know the ground they stand on and the reason why. (Smith, 1965, 45.)

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